

DISABILITIES EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

Since its inception in 1990, the American's with Disabilities Act has fundamentally changed the civil rights movement within the United States. Before this landmark legislation, society relegated disabled individuals to a second-class status; devoid of the legal protections afforded many other groups in the United States. The passage of this act ensured disabled individuals the rights granted to them within the Constitution. Some have suggested that the protection of rights for disabled Americans is one of the final frontiers of the American movement for civil rights.

Discrimination against the disabled permeated most of American society in the early Twentieth Century as social critique merged with developing understandings of science, resulting in eugenics and other "scientific" tools for social and political oppression. Social scientists advocated the non-voluntary sterilization of Americans with physical and mental disabilities and the institutionalization of thousands of Americans - removed from society, with no legal protections and often in inhumane conditions.

As scientific understanding of disabilities advanced, the practice of eugenics began to wane. However, disabled Americans continued to face discrimination in education, employment, public accommodations and housing. The disabilities rights movement was a grassroots effort to equalize access to the many opportunities afforded other Americans. The process was long and hard fought, and challenged the perceptions many Americans held of those living with mental and physical disabilities.

Most Americans have a limited understanding of the movement for equal rights for those with disabilities, recognizing only the passage of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. President George H.W. Bush's signing of this act was

certainly instrumental to the progression of equality for disabled Americans.

Nevertheless, this historic legislation was the culmination of a two century-long movement to secure equal status for disabled citizens. The efforts and struggles of generations of men and women, who dedicated their lives to overcoming the tremendous obstacles between disabled Americans and equality, too often go unrecognized.

Throughout the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, individuals and groups strived to provide disabled Americans with access to education, adequate housing and higher standards of living (see Disability History Timeline), but still forced to keep disabled persons separated from the larger society. Nevertheless, it was the effort of these thousands of individuals that broke down the societal perceptions that perpetuated social and legal discrimination - laying the foundation for the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This legislation continues to ensure disabled individuals equal access to the benefits of American society.

In order to raise awareness of the struggle for disabilities rights in the United States, Congress has declared October Disabilities Employment Awareness Month in 1988. This was an expansion of National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week, started in 1945. During this month, programs across the county focus on the contributions of disabled individuals to our nation, and address the issues still surrounding equal access to employment.